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ABSTRACT

Critics of collaborative learning such as Greg Myers argue that educators might let their enthusiasm for collaborative learning lead them to accepting social construction of knowledge as a good thing in itself. It is important, however, to distinguish between the use of specific collaborative learning activities--such as peer response groups or collective brainstorming--and collaborative learning as a holistic educational philosophy that informs all that goes on in the classroom. The real challenge arises in maintaining a dual perspective: seeing the social in the individual and the individual in the social. Implementing a collaborative learning strategy in a traditional academic setting is extremely difficult. The competitive nature of colleges and universities, the system of evaluation, students' past educational experiences, and even the academic calendar, all impede successful collaboration. The profession's fear of plagiarism and the compulsion to isolate students from each other during testing sessions are indicative of the fervent conviction that authorship is inherently individual. If there is to be any chance for success, educators will need to subject themselves to ideological self-analysis, examining those ideas and assumptions that seem most commonsensical and therefore inevitable, making them suddenly problematic, even uncomfortable. Only by discussing conflict and complication openly can teachers prevent collaborative learning from becoming just another pedagogical fad. (Six references are included.) (AEW)

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THE CASE FOR COLLABORATION

Like many people who propose a paper in May of one year and actually write it in March of the next, I have found myself wishing I'd provided a different title for my remarks today. For my intention is not to speak as an apologist for collaborative learning, as my title perhaps implies. Rather, I hope to raise questions and urge distinctions that will encourage us all to reconsider--and perhaps revise--what we mean when we argue for or against the use of collaborative learning methods in composition classes.

My title is accurate, however, in one respect: I decided to propose this topic because I wanted to respond to a a recent attack against collaborative learning, Greg Myers' essay on "Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching" (published in College English in February of last year). In my view, Myers' analysis represents the first truly rigorous theoretical challenge to those who advocate collaborative learning in writing classes. A number of previous articles have focused on the pedagogical difficulties that inevitably attend any effort to deviate from the traditional culture and methods that continue to dominate schools and colleges in North America. These difficulties are both real and important--Andrea Lunsford and I have, in fact, recently

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commented on them in an article in last spring's issue of WPA honoring Ken Bruffee. But articles that question the pedagogical effectiveness of collaborative learning aren't able (and don't try) to challenge its theoretical and ideological underpinnings. Greg Myers does attempt such an analysis and challenge.

I hope that you have read Myers' lengthy and wide-ranging article, for I'm going to have to give a very condensed summary. Myers is quite explicit about his goals; he begins his essay with the statement that he "would like to raise some political questions about two methods of teaching... [methods that he notes that he himself uses in his writing classes]: having small groups of students collaborate on and critique each other's writing, and having case assignments based on some actual writing situation"(154). (I will be concerned only with Myers' discussion of collaborative learning here, though the two strands of his argument are closely related.) Myers locates these two methods in the work of Peter Elbow and Kenneth Bruffee. Before investigating their formulations, however, Myers examines the work of an earlier educator, Sterling Andrus Leonard. Myers adopts this strategy, he notes, in part because "the distance in time makes it easier to see...[Leonard's] social context than the context of Elbow or Bruffee"(154).

I cannot reproduce all the strands of Myers' argument, which is less concerned with the pragmatics of collaborative learning than with the appeals on which those advocating collaborative learning have based their arguments. But I can present his

conclusions. Myers' essential criticism, as I understand it, is that advocates of collaborative learning methods describe these methods as if they were free of ideological influences and constraints. (When he uses the term ideology, Myers refers not to a "body of systematic political beliefs," such as Marxism, but to "the whole system of thought and belief that goes with a social and economic system, the thoughts that structure our thinking so deeply that we take them for granted"[156].) He identifies two central appeals that, he argues, are employed by Leonard and, later, by Bruffee and Elbow: an appeal to the authority of consensus and an appeal to the authority of reality. The result, Myers notes (in a subsequent letter published in College English responding to criticisms of his essay) is that "the rhetoric of collaborative learning seems to suggest that there is something inherently good and innocent about agreement, persuasion, compromise, and a deliberative procedure" (CE, "Comment and Response," vol. 49, Feb. 1987, p. 212).

It is important to recognize that Myers is generally in theoretical agreement with Bruffee and other social constructivists who view writing as a social process, an important means by which knowledge is communally generated and maintained. His concern, clearly articulated in his essay, is that we may "let our enthusiasm for this social view lead us to accepting social construction of knowledge as a good thing in itself"(171). Where Bruffee typically presents peer groups as a powerful means of helping students become fully participating

members of new communities of discourse, for instance, Myers is concerned that, as "fierce enforcers of conformity"(159), groups will "confine...[students]in ideological structures(166-67)." The power of student groups is particularly strong, Myers believes, because collaborative learning strategies may make it possible for teachers consciously or unconsciously to embody their authority "in the more effective guise of class consensus," which, according to Myers "has a power over individual students that a teacher can not have"(159).

There are, I believe, a number of weak links in Myers' essay. The view of collaborative learning on which he bases his arguments, for instance, is limited both pedagogically and theoretically. As I will argue in a moment, collaborative learning in writing classes can involve much more than "having students collaborate on and critique each other's writing. Furthermore, important as their research is, Bruffee and Elbow are not the only theorists whose work informs current collaborative learning efforts in composition.

Another limitation involves Myers' failure to articulate the connection that he sees operating between what he calls "the rhetoric of collaborative learning" and its actual practice. As I noted earlier, Myers states that his argument is limited to the claims made by Elbow, Bruffee, and others in support of collaborative learning. He even admits that "the best writing class I ever observed was led by a teacher thoroughly committed to collaborative learning." The effect of his argument, however,

is strongly to question the practice of collaborative learning. Given this, Myers' readers might reasonably expect some discussion of how the problems he locates in Elbow's and Bruffee's theories manifest themselves in actual classes. Myers' conclusion, in which he calls not for new methods but for a new "stance towards one's teaching"(169) is also frustratingly vague. How would Myers' collaborative learning-based class differ in actual practice from Elbow's or Bruffee's? Myers also errs, I believe, in defining collaborative learning as essentially a "consensus-based method"(158), a method where consensus (which Myers implicitly equates with the dominant or established pre-existing understanding) is used "to set and enforce standards"(159) by "eliminating or at least concealing diversity and conflict"(160). It may be that those in composition who have argued for collaborative learning have not adequately emphasized the potential negative effects of peer influence on students working in groups--although, as Myers acknowledges, in "Collaboration and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" (CE 46[1984]), Bruffee specifically refers to the need to avoid "the many possible negative effects of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality" (Bruffee, 652).

Research on cooperative learning in education and on small group dynamics and problem-solving in social psychology, speech communication, and sociology--research that many of us who are interested in collaborative learning in composition classes are

quite familiar with--has a long and rich tradition of exploring and defining both the negative and positive consequences of collaboration in groups. In Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills, for instance, Johnson and Johnson specifically argue that members of groups should encourage, not discourage, conflict (4). Irving Janis' GroupThink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes applies the concept of group dynamics to such historic policy decisions as the Bay of Pigs, outlining with frightening clarity "the power of a face-to-face group to set norms that influence members"(3).

Myers might counter that this research does not really concern itself with the specifically ideological conflict that he clearly hopes to foster. And he would be at least partly right. But then Myers' concern with the importance of encouraging ideological conflict results from his own political views. One final major weakness in Myers' essay, then, is his failure to distinguish between politics and ideology and to explicitly lay out the political assumptions that have influenced his own view of the role ideology plays in education and society.

I wish that Greg Myers had more clearly established the relationship between politics and ideology in his essay, for such a distinction would give his argument for the importance of examining the ideological assumptions inherent in our research and teaching more force and credibility. Myers is right, I think, in charging that those of us who base our advocacy of collaborative learning methods on social constructivist

epistemological theories, as articulated by Rorty, Geertz, and others, have in some respects been naive. We have tended to see our recent escape from the dualistic straightjacket of Cartesianism and philosophical foundationalism as inherently and inevitably positive. The notion of culture and knowledge as conversation has been liberating for us, so we have assumed that it would be for our students as well. In his essay, Greg Myers reminds us that there is no necessary connection between our intentions and their effect on students.

Myers' essay also confirmed my own growing sense that we need to subject our recent enthusiasm for viewing writing as a social process to critical analysis. Without such analysis, we may be in danger of merely flip-flopping--convincing ourselves that we have made major theoretical revisions in our view of writing when in fact we are simply looking at the other side of the same coin. Either perspective on writing, the individual or the social, when held too rigidly, effectively blocks the other from view. The real challenge--and this is my conclusion, not Myers--lies in maintaining a double perspective: seeing the social in the individual and the individual in the social.

We also need to distinguish more carefully between the use of specific collaborative learning activities, such as peer response groups or group brainstorming, and collaborative learning as a holistic educational philosophy, a philosophy that informs all that we do in our classrooms. If as teachers we are genuinely interested in empowering our students and in enabling

them, though the process of writing, to learn to analyze their own thoughts and actions (an essential component of ideological analysis), we will move toward the latter model of collaborative learning. As Leslie Ashcroft argues in an essay in Language Arts on "Defusing 'Empowering'" The What and the Why," "Empowering can't be something you do some hours of the school day or certain periods of the week. It is conscious and pervasive or it is ineffectual and...nonexistent" (151).

Anyone who has attempted to implement collaborative learning strategies in a traditional academic setting knows just how difficult a process this is. As we are all aware, the competitive nature of our colleges and universities, our system of evaluation, our students' past educational experiences, even our academic calendar (particularly the quarter system) all create obstacles to successful collaboration. The collaborative learning model, in fact, runs directly counter to our own professional training and reward system. Andrea and I have written and spoken about how our early attempts at collaboration were discouraged--how Andrea's department in Canada refused to recognize any of her coauthored or coedited pulications when she applied for promotion, and how my department, though more supportive of our collaboration, still as part of my tenure review asked Andrea to write a letter confirming that we had, indeed, contributed equally as coauthors to our published articles. Have we, I wonder, adequately considered the impediments our own institutions and professional contexts

present to successful collaborative learning?

If we are going to have any chance of success, we are going to need to subject ourselves to some ideological self-analysis. In so doing, we should try to look at those ideas and assumptions that seem most commonsensical and inevitable. Why have we as a profession been so obsessed with the fear that our students might plagiarize? Why have we clung so fervently to the notion of authorship as inherently individual? (In his essay Myers deftly analyzes Peter Elbow's 'relentlessly internal' [165] view of writing.) Why do we assume that testing necessarily requires isolating students from one another? Questions like these do indeed require us to look at "the thoughts that structure our system so deeply that we take them for granted"(Myers, 156).

We can also enrich our understanding of collaborative learning by studying the history of nonacademic, as well as acasdemic, learning and writing groups, as Ann Gere has done in Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications, and by conducting ethnographic research. I have been intrigued, for instance, by the differences in the way collaborative learning works--or doesn't work--in my composition classes and in the Writing Lab which I direct. Some of the reasons for these differences are obvious; others lie more deeply below the surface.

The effect of ideological analysis is generally to make that which once seemed commonsensical, inevitable, and natural suddenly problematic, and even uncomfortable. Raising problems,

as I have done today, may seem like a strange way to make a case for collaborative learning. But only by bringing conflict and complication into view, as I have tried to do here, can we prevent collaborative learning from becoming just another pedagogical fad.

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